

2004

## Two Dreamtimes: Representation of indigeneity in the work of Australian poet Judith Wright and Canadian artist Emily Carr

Anne Collett

Dorothy Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Collett, Anne and Jones, Dorothy, Two Dreamtimes: Representation of indigeneity in the work of Australian poet Judith Wright and Canadian artist Emily Carr, *Kunapipi*, 26(2), 2004.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol26/iss2/12>

---

## Two Dreamtimes: Representation of indigeneity in the work of Australian poet Judith Wright and Canadian artist Emily Carr

### Abstract

A child of the nineteenth century, Emily Carr was born on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in 1871 and painted her last works in the early 1940s, dying in 1945. Judith Wright was born on the New England tableland, New South Wales, in 1915, became a published poet in the early 1940s, and continued to publish poetry, essays, fiction and biography until her death in the first year of the twenty-first century.

ANNE COLLETT and DOROTHY JONES

## Two Dreamtimes: Representation of Indigeneity in the Work of Australian Poet Judith Wright and Canadian Artist Emily Carr

A child of the nineteenth century, Emily Carr was born on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in 1871 and painted her last works in the early 1940s, dying in 1945. Judith Wright was born on the New England tableland, New South Wales, in 1915, became a published poet in the early 1940s, and continued to publish poetry, essays, fiction and biography until her death in the first year of the twenty-first century. Why bring together an Australian poet and a Canadian painter whose published working lives overlap by little more than one or two years — artists separated not only by choice of form, but by thousands of miles of the Pacific ocean? The separation of time and place would appear to be vast, but appearances can be deceptive, for (to quote from Wright's first published volume of poetry) — 'blood's red thread still binds us fast in history' ('Trains' 13). What these two artists share is in many ways greater than what separates them — that common ground being provided by the historical trajectory of British invasion and colonisation of the Pacific rim. Wright and Carr are daughters 'born of the conqueror'<sup>1</sup> whose art and life work is haunted by an aboriginal presence. Both struggle to articulate self (and nation) in relation to that presence — a presence that most of their generation chose either to ignore or repudiate. A comparison of their representation of indigeneity is necessarily complex, and here, on the site of their shared ground, there are as many differences as similarities; but contrast is an effective tool by which to bring aspects of both artists' work into sharper relief than previously.

According to most sources, Emily Carr's interest in Canadian aboriginal art began (in 1899) with her first trip to the Nootka Indian mission at Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island. This trip is recorded in one of a collection of stories written and published some forty years later<sup>2</sup> in which she writes of that initial 'aboriginal experience' as one of sensitively negotiated relationship. She sketches everything in sight — 'boats, trees, houses' — except the Indians themselves. For this she asks and is granted permission, but the sketching of an old woman is interrupted by the anger of the woman's husband who believes, like other 'old Indians', that the reproduction of the human image traps the

spirit of the subject. The missionary responds with a deprecatory dismissal, 'They have such silly notions', but Carr represents her own response as one of cultural and personal sensitivity: "'Tell her that I will not make any more pictures of the old people," I said.' ('Ucluelet' 9) This is followed by a curious statement of affiliation that links the Indians, Carr herself, and the natural world:

It must have hurt the Indians dreadfully to have the things they had always believed trampled on and torn from their hugging. Down deep we all hug something. The great forest hugs its silence. The sea and the air hug the spilled cries of sea-birds. The forest hugs only silence; its birds and even its beasts are mute. (9)

Humanity and nature are joined in the shared action of 'hugging' — the need to hold on to something that is sacred to us. This precious thing — 'spirit' perhaps — is something that Carr sought throughout her life, and something that she ultimately seeks to represent, even capture, in her painting; but it would be eight years before Carr could undertake another trip into Indian territory. During this intervening period she suffered bouts of mental and emotional instability — what might be diagnosed in her own words, as a debilitating detachment from that 'hugging' thing. She did however recover, and after re-establishing a life for herself in Vancouver, travelled with her sister to Alaska in 1907, visiting many of the old, often deserted Indian villages. Here she is struck by the strength of spirit and the skilled craftsmanship of the carved village and house poles that are rapidly deteriorating, and vows to record them for posterity:

We passed many Indian villages on our way down the coast. The Indian people and their Art touched me deeply.... By the time I reached home my mind was made up. I was going to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could. (*Growing Pains* 211)

Emily Carr's artistic engagement with Indian life and culture begins then with spiritual and emotional sympathy, and a commitment to what might be called the museum ethos of embalment and categorisation — a desire to record and preserve that which is either extinct or threatened with extinction. The image of a vanishing art and culture would be captured in sketchbook and on canvas.

Over the next five years Carr made a number of subsequent trips in pursuit of new material, meticulously recording carved poles throughout the west coast native villages. 'Big Raven' [featured on the cover of this issue] is first recorded in word and paint in 1912 [Fig.1 'Cumshewa'] when she visited an abandoned Haida village in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Her impressions of the village of Cumshewa are recorded in the story of the same name (and also published in *Klee Wyck*). Here Carr describes the very paper upon which she sketches and the paints with which she formulates the image of Raven as literally soaked in the spirit of the village: 'Cumshewa seems always to drip, always to be blurred with mist, its foliage always to hang wet-heavy. Cumshewa rain soaked my paper, Cumshewa rain trickled among my paints' (23). The village is deserted of people,



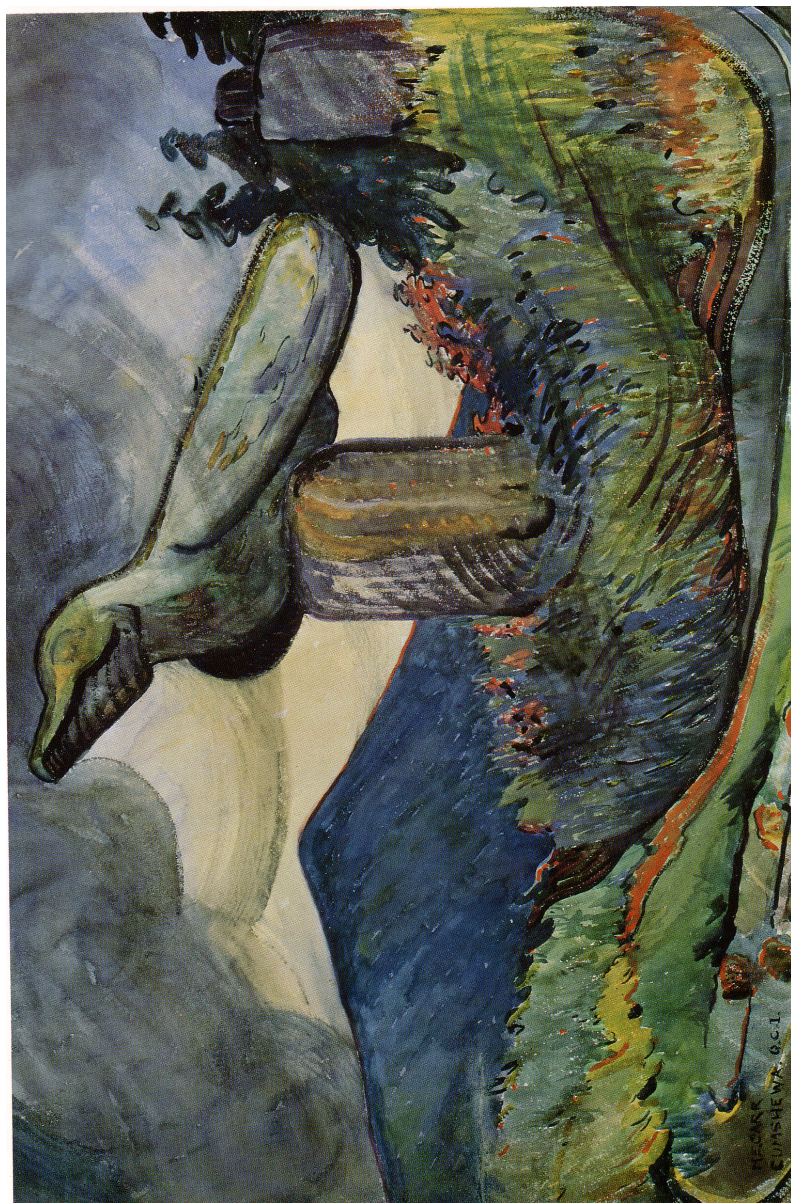


Fig 1. Emily Carr, *Cumshewa*, c. 1912, watercolour over graphite on woven paper, mounted on cardboard, National Gallery of Canada, 6103 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)



Fig 2. Emily Carr, *Big Raven*, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.11  
(Photo: Trevor Mills)

culture is returned to nature: the Raven grave-post *is* Cumsheewa — guardian spirit of a disappeared people whose material form is also vanishing:

Not far from the house sat a great wooden raven mounted on a rather low pole; his wings were flattened to his sides. A few feet from him stuck up an empty pole. His mate had sat there but she had rotted away long ago, leaving him moss-grown, dilapidated and alone to watch dead Indian bones, for these two great birds had been set, one on either side of the doorway of a big house that had been full of dead Indians who had died during a small-pox epidemic. ('Cumsheewa' 24)

Carr's commentary on Cumsheewa is fascinating both for what it says and for what it does not say. The raven is deserted even of his life companion — for she has rotted away — and he himself, the sole and last vestige of a life and culture, is rapidly deteriorating. The carved wooden pole is in a process of return to natural origins — moss-grown and rotting, as the bodies of the Indians over which he watches are also returned to bone and then to dust. It would seem that the disappearance of Indian culture is represented as part of a natural cycle — dust to dust, ashes to ashes. A culture born out of the natural world returns to the natural world: the reference to the death of an Indian community ravaged by small-pox is not linked to European invasion or associated with any judgement or guilt that might be associated with Emily Carr herself, a daughter of the coloniser.

Carr's watercolour rendition of the wooden raven tends toward the naturalistic: the raven itself is static — a carved wooden post — greyed by weather; the vegetation at the base is picturesque in its flourish of detailed colour and movement. Art critic Doris Shadbolt describes it in terms of its compositional facility — a picture carefully composed of 'elegant foreground arabesques and touches of intense colour' (1979 38). It is a skilful replication whose picturesque quality aligns it with the Romantic but does not associate it with the emotive politics that underscored the Romantic movement; but in 1931 Carr returned to the subject matter of 'Cumsheewa' and again painted Big Raven [Fig.2 'Big Raven']. The years between 1912 and 1931 had wrought a change in her artistic and personal vision, largely precipitated by contact with the painting and philosophy of the Canadian 'Group of Seven',<sup>3</sup> but also by the Modernist art movement. In her autobiography, *Growing Pains*, Carr records the initial impact of Indian art on her English schooling: 'Indian Art broadened my seeing, loosened the formal tightness I had learned in England's schools. Its bigness and stark reality baffled my white man's understanding ... I had been schooled to see outsides only, not struggle to pierce.' (211) Some twenty years later, in a journal that recorded the period spent in the company of the 'Group of Seven' on the east coast of Canada, she writes of a significant change in her own artistic vision and response to Indian art: a shift from the anthropological or archaeological to the visionary or symbolic. On seeing some 'Indian pictures' by A.Y. Jackson, she writes:



I feel a little as if beaten at my own game. His Indian pictures have something mine lack — rhythm, poetry. Mine are so downright. But perhaps his haven't quite the love in them of the people and the country that mine have. How could they? He is not a Westerner and I took no liberties. I worked for history and cold fact. Next time I paint Indians I'm going off on a tangent tear. There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood, the vastness, the wildness.

(*Hundreds and Thousands* 5)

'Big Raven' is the representation of a powerful spirit: the boldness of colour and line, the swirling undergrowth, the contrast of horizontal lowering cloud and slanting vertical sheets of brilliant light and rain, heighten the drama and power of the carved pole. This is no longer the record of a vanishing, but the reincarnation of a vibrant energy. The Raven lives through Emily Carr's visionary art: Indian spirit is a living, growing, vibrant force that unites earth and sky.

In her journal entry of 5th February 1931, Carr remarks upon her achievement and her aims, at first prosaically, but increasingly poetically:

Got the Cumshewa big bird well disposed on canvas. The great bird is on a post in tangled growth, a distant mountain below and a lowering, heavy sky and one pine tree. I want to bring great loneliness to this canvas and a haunting broodiness, quiet and powerful. (*Hundreds and Thousands* 27)

The words are an uncanny pre-echo of Judith Wright's poem, 'At Cooloolah' (published in the Australian *Bulletin* in 1954):

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's twilight  
has fished there longer than our centuries.  
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,  
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.  
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,  
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,  
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah  
knew no land is lost or won by wars,  
for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle  
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

Riding at noon and ninety years ago,  
my grandfather was beckoned by a ghost —  
a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting,  
who sank into bare plain, as now into time past.

White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark,  
clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan —  
I know that we are justified only by love,  
but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.

And walking on clean sand among the prints  
 of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear  
 thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,  
 must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

(*Collected Poems* 140–41)

Here too is an image of bird and aboriginal presence — an image of quiet, solitude, power, and haunting broodiness. Like Carr's image of the raven, the blue crane is 'the certain heir' of the world into which he is born, but unlike the raven, the crane is given no aboriginal association — if he is totemic of 'those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah', there is no indication of this in the poem. The first peoples are represented only by the ghost of 'a black accounted warrior' who rises to confront the white settler (Wright's grandfather) with the guilt of violent invasion and dispossession, only to sink again 'into bare plain, as now into time past'. Aboriginal presence dissolves into land and into 'time past' — subsumed by the natural world, and the poetic scene is restored to the tranquil peace of 'White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark, / clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan'. Wright suggests that this edenic world is defiled by human presence. It is unclear whether 'our centuries' is a reference to the centuries of white presence in Australia or indicative of human presence on the earth, inclusive of aboriginal peoples; but the pristine beauty of the landscape is defiled once more by violence, guilt and fear as Wright's own prints join those of 'bird and animal' on 'the clean sand', and again the ghost of aboriginality rises to challenge this new intruder with a 'driftwood spear/thrust from the water'. Thus aboriginality is signified as guardian and protector of the natural world — unquiet spirit of the land, but not of the land in the same way the crane is 'certain heir'. It is an unsettling representation that simultaneously accords and refuses aboriginal peoples humanity, grants and denies them presence in this world — the world of 'culture' in the twentieth century.

The totemic Raven that guards the house of the dead Indians is the signifier of spectral aboriginal presence, but Carr's painting of 'Big Raven' celebrates aboriginal spirit through dynamic representation — totem is rendered living spirit. The trees that 'grew up round the dilapidated old raven, sheltering him from the tearing winds' and 'the moss that grew upon his back and in the hollows of his eye-sockets' ('Cumshewa' 24) gave the totem a 'hugging place', sheltering the spirit of aboriginality, as represented in Carr's painting of 'Cumshewa'. But in its final form, the comforting moss that paradoxically threatens the sight and the strength of wing in the 'Cumshewa' figure, is transformed to a faint sheen of dark green on a gleaming black body that bears relationship but is not engulfed by the vital force of green origins. Emily's totemic Raven has defied disintegration and decay. Time and art have worked together to create 'living spirit', whereas time has rendered the ghost of aboriginal presence in the last stanza of Wright's poem even less than it was in the fourth: only the signification of the black

warrior — his spear — remains, and it has become driftwood, weathered by the waters of time like the carved post of the raven Carr paints in her first rendition of ‘Cumshewa’.

Although published in 1954, Wright’s ‘Cooloolah’ poem has more in common with Carr’s early phase of aboriginal representation, than it does with the later, visionary, ‘Big Raven’. This is further underscored by the close thematic relationship between Carr’s commentary on ‘Cumshewa’ and Wright’s many other ‘Aboriginal poems’ written both earlier and later than ‘At Cooloolah’. Carr writes of a ‘Bursting growth [that] had hidden the house and bones long ago. Rain turned their dust into mud; these strong young trees were richer perhaps for that Indian dust’ (‘Cumshewa’ 24). The lines are reminiscent of ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’ in which Wright asks, ‘Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,/and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?’ (16–17). In both ‘Cumshewa’ and ‘Nigger’s Leap’, aboriginal people are ‘one’ with the land — their life force channelled into natural growth: ‘tribes become trees’.<sup>4</sup> The spectral nation of shadow trees is a recurring motif in Wright’s poetry — the ‘thin black children dancing like the shadows / Of saplings in the wind’ (23–24) of ‘Nigger’s Leap’, the ‘apple-gums’ of ‘Bora Ring’ that ‘posture and mime a past corroborree’ (7), or the much later reference in ‘Two Dreamtimes’ to ‘a once-loved land / Peopled by tribes and trees’ (69–70). If aboriginal peoples are as one with nature, it would appear to be a vanishing — oneness achieved not in life, but in death. This is a curious twist to the idea of aboriginal relationship to land that is central to Wright’s environment and aboriginal concerns. In a 1982 interview with Jim Davidson she claimed to feel ‘very deeply this gulf between us and the Aborigines; the Aborigines *are* the land, we merely think we own it,’ (332). Taken in conjunction with a claim made in 1975 that,

the problem of how to stay human in our times, and the problem of how to regain a respect for the living world, may be very closely related. We can rejoin ourselves in creative responsibility and participation with what we call ‘Nature’ — which is also ourselves — or we can die with it. Perhaps we have enough time to choose the first alternative (Foreword, *Invited* ix),

it would seem that the aboriginal peoples have no choice and no alternative. They *are* the land, not by virtue of right living (Wordsworth’s ‘right instincts’), but through the sin of ‘our’ actions — the crime of violence as ‘ancient as Cain’. As such, the aboriginal peoples become a part of that darkness — the shadow of Cain (or perhaps even the shadow of original sin) — that threatens to ‘flood’ the civilising project of the enlightenment. The ‘sheer and limelilt granite head’ (4) of ‘Nigger’s Leap’ might represent the force of ‘reason’ — the rational daylight world that disregards (at its own peril) the ‘heart of darkness’ represented by the destruction of a people and a culture, driven over ‘the lipped cliff’ (7). Thus the aboriginal dust of Wright’s poem is aligned with a disturbing cannibalism: ‘Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,/and the black dust our crops ate

was their dust?’ (16–17). ‘Other’ is ‘Self’ for they ‘were ourselves writ strange’ (21), thus their loss is our loss, and ‘all men are one man at last’ (18):

Never from earth again the coolamon  
 Or thin black children dancing like the shadows  
 Of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh  
 Carp of the tableland and cools its granite.  
 Night floods us suddenly as history  
 That has sunk many islands in its good time.

(‘Nigger’s Leap’ 22–27)

There is an awareness of historical and personal culpability here that is absent from Carr’s work; but although Judith Wright’s aboriginal spear that thrusts from out of the peaceful waters of Cooloolah is accusatory (reminiscent of the sword rising from the lake of Arthurian legend and the inevitable fall of Camelot) where Carr’s raven is not, this lack of articulated political awareness of the violence and damage of entangled settler/indigenous relationship does not confer a political lack as such. Emily Carr’s ‘Big Raven’ is a powerful and positive representation of indigenous spirit that breaks free from the entanglement of undergrowth, where Wright’s poem is focussed upon the wrathful spirit of earth that will extract payment for aboriginal loss that cannot be made good: ‘the invader’s feet will tangle / in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears’ (11–12) but the clear waters of the lake close over the aboriginal spear — perhaps to wash up as driftwood: the potent vertical is converted to the passive horizontal. This is an image that has much in common with Margaret Preston’s painting, titled ‘Aboriginal Landscape’, of 1941 [see Fig. 3]. Preston, a leading exponent of modernist painting in Australia, was much pre-occupied with aboriginal themes and subject matter as a means of expressing a specific national identity.

The early 1940s date of Margaret Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ is significant because it is a period that brings the work of Carr and Wright into synchronology and it is a date synonymous with public awareness of the impact of European modernism on Australian art (Margaret Preston in particular, but also [by 1943] the Joshua Smith/William Dobell, Archibald prize debacle) and Australian poetry (Jindyworabaks, Angry Penguins, Max Harris and the Ern Malley hoax). The appropriative relationship between modernist art practice and ‘primitive’ cultures is well documented; but what might be termed the benefit of that often one-sided cultural engagement has not been discussed as thoroughly as it might. The practice saw European re-evaluation of other cultures accompanied by a resurgence and re-activation of ‘dying’ or ‘buried’ indigenous arts, that often had spiritual and economic benefit to indigenous communities in Australia and Canada; but the attitude of those communities toward the colonisation of their arts is at the centre of sometimes vitriolic debate. Opinion is divided on the ethical and artistic merit of Margaret Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Art’, in part because it is suggested she makes use of a cultural heritage not her

own — one that she neither understands, nor perhaps has the right to understand — and deploys it to further a ‘nationalist’ agenda that acts to homogenise rather than accord value to significant differences within the imaginary of Australian nation. These questions aside, ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ makes clear the problematic nature of its representation of indigeneity.

The title of Margaret Preston’s painting is itself equivocal: is this a landscape as the Aboriginal people might have painted it? (the use of ‘Aboriginal’ obliterates the possibility of national and cultural difference within Aboriginal nations); or is this a landscape that belongs to the Aboriginal people? Is it a landscape that signifies ‘Aboriginality’? Is it a transference of Aboriginal colour and design to a rendition of ‘typical’ Australian-Aboriginal landscape? or is it a landscape that subsumes Aboriginal humanity — thus ‘Aboriginal’ is equated with ‘Landscape’. Whichever her intent, the last two possibilities inform this current discussion, for the transference of what might be read as Aboriginal body-design to trees and land suggests a transference of culture to nature: does this have similar implication to Wright’s inference that Aboriginal life-force has been subsumed by nature? Or that an aboriginal people has become a spectral nation — embodied in the skeleton ghost gums and the tree shadows that bear uncannily resemblance to recumbent (even corpse-like) human form?

Interestingly, this spectral theme is the focus of ‘Vanquished’, a work completed by Carr in 1931 [Fig.4]. The subject is a ruined Indian graveyard. As with Preston’s painting there is a play of verticals and horizontals, and interestingly, the title of the work is similarly ambiguous. Does the word ‘vanquished’ suggest that all human beings are vanquished by death, or is it the Indians specifically who are or have been vanquished by death, or indeed by an invading and conquering civilisation? Alternatively, does ‘vanquished’ imply that all attempt to establish a lasting human presence in material form is ultimately overwhelmed by nature? The structure and dynamic of the painting itself is however less equivocal than the title would suggest, and more energised and life-affirming than the flattened patterning of Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’. The upward thrust of the grave posts in ‘Vanquished’, reinforced on the left of the painting by the rays of light that link earth and sky and on the right by the alignment of the posts with the upward lines of the mountains, is very different in effect from Preston’s weak verticals. Carr’s painting would appear to represent an energised cyclical vision: the horizontal of uprooted trees and driftwood in the foreground — suggestive of death and decay — are balanced by the man-made poles in the middle-ground that, although in a state of ruin, have been created by the living and reach towards the sky. Similarly, sombre, overhanging clouds parallel the dead wood in the foreground, but the lower part of the sky is illuminated, thereby again suggesting a cyclical movement of darkness into light, life born out of death. Even the ragged roots of the dead tree in the foreground are echoed in the shape of the mountain in the centre background — both reach up towards the sky and the light. Although its subject is a graveyard, Carr’s





Fig 3. Margaret Preston, Australia, 1875-1963, *Aboriginal Landscape*, 1941, Sydney, oil on canvas, 40.0 x 52.0 cm, D. & J.T. Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



Fig 4. Emily Carr, *Vanquished*, 1930, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.6 (Photo: Trevor Mills)

‘Vanquished’ emphasises cyclical patterns of growth and a dynamic relationship between darkness and light, death and life. Unlike the life-affirming balance established between horizontal and vertical in ‘Vanquished’, or the strong vertical up-thrust of Carr’s ‘Big Raven’, the bodies of trees/trees of bodies in Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ lean into the background of the painting, suggesting a lack of dynamism that is reinforced in the horizontals formed by the shadows.

The general effect of Preston’s painting evokes a passivity that in some ways corresponds to Wright’s poetic motif of a shadow (tree) people. Despite Wright’s forward-looking pro-active engagement in the negotiation of Aboriginal land rights and ‘call for a treaty’, her poetic representation of aboriginality (of which there is surprisingly little) is backward-looking and dominated by a sense of loss. It is a poetry that collapses ‘culture’ into ‘nature’ such that the politics of aboriginal land rights becomes the poetics (and the polemics) of *land’s* rights: ‘aboriginal’ is lost, or at least subsumed — granted agency only as a ghostly reminder of a lost Eden. In a poem written to her ‘shadow sister’, Kath Walker, (published in 1973) Wright declares that

If we are sisters, it’s in this —  
our grief for a lost country,  
the place we dreamed in long ago,  
poisoned now and crumbling. (‘Two Dreamtimes’ 41–44)

Whilst acknowledging the particular suffering of Kath’s communal and cultural loss as a child of the stolen generation — ‘your eyes were full of the dying children,/ the blank-eyed women’ (15–16) — that loss becomes a general human loss, equated with environmental concerns: ‘I mourn as you mourn/ the ripped length of the island beaches,/ the drained paperbarks swamps’ (50–52). Cultural worlds of black and white sisters that are perhaps incommensurable become One — thus ‘two dreamtimes’ are One for ‘both of us die as our dreamtime dies’ (89). Judith recalls Kath to that far time of deceptively innocent childhood:

Let us go back to that far time,  
I riding the cleared hills,  
plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,  
hearing the call of the plover,  
in a land I thought was mine for life.

...

The easy Eden-dreamtime then  
in a country of birds and trees (45–54)

‘I riding the cleared hills’ makes plain the power relationship between the two ‘sisters’, a power in the hands of a sister whose ‘father’s father’ (‘Eroded Hills’) cleared the hills of ‘tribes and trees’. The image recalls the motif of ‘horse and rider’ accosted by the aboriginal presence in both ‘At Cooloolah’ and ‘Bora Ring’. It is also an image that figures in the geological and moral scape of ‘Nigger’s Leap’ in which the description of ‘eastwood spurs’ that ‘tip backwood

from the sun' might be read as the image of a horseman leaning back in his saddle. The act of driving aboriginal peoples over the edge of the cliff to their deaths is imaged as an act that must seek the cover of darkness — an act by which the 'civilising' mission of the enlightenment must be judged. The image of horse and rider has been associated with the dominance of reason over man's baser, sensual, animal nature at least since the middle ages. Throughout the period of European invasion of the 'new world', and in the resultant colonial context, the white man on horseback is an image of the coloniser's dominance over indigenous peoples, and by association, the dominance of reason and culture over feeling (or sensuality) and nature. This is a hierarchy that Wright adamantly rejects. In 1972 she observes that:

We are beginning to see that 'nature' and 'man' are not separate, that each needs the other; it is a small beginning, but a beginning. And it is a reassertion of the values of *feeling* against the economic and technological Gradgrinds of our time.

... There is no stronger force than emotion, if it is well based and well directed. For it is feeling that establishes values, and if we are ever to move from economic values to a reassertion of ecological values our feelings and sympathies must be engaged first. ('Individual' 254)

Wright unequivocally and unswervingly aligns herself with the philosophy of romanticism — only by love can we be saved (see 'Nigger's Leap'). Romantic thought privileges feeling over reason and allies that capacity for feeling with a return to the natural world and our Edenic selves (pre-industrial revolution); but romanticism is also aligned with the spirit of democracy: a Wordsworthian romanticism associates capacity for empathy with the common man, particularly, with the shepherd — the noble savage 'at home'. Relationship is also established between 'natural' man and 'natural' god; in his natural state man has a spiritual affinity with the natural world. The modernists, however, turned away from the common man of the industrialised world (the defiled shepherd) to the imagined 'purity' of the noble savage 'away from home'. The 'primitive' other is looked to as a source of spiritual rejuvenation of our (better) lost selves, and the rejuvenation of European art.

As daughters of the conqueror and daughters of the modern world, both Wright and Carr (on different levels of consciousness and through different modes of articulation) are aware of the violence done to indigenous peoples by the civilising force of reason, of missionary Christianity, of industrialisation, and of greed (Wordsworthian 'getting and spending' become capitalism); aboriginal peoples are equated with the spiritual, emotional realm of the natural — thus they represent a lost world — the Edenic world — in which culture and nature were indivisible. Both Wright and Carr turn to the 'primitive' (who is now both 'at home' and 'away from home') as solution to the ills of the industrial world.

The difference between Carr and Wright in terms of their representation of that lost primitive self is that Wright's poetry would suggest that 'they' and 'we'



are irrevocably lost — perhaps we can learn from them but we cannot undo the wrong done and we cannot return the dead to the living. Carr's art shifts from the desire to preserve what is left of that (almost) lost world to the celebration (and thence renewal) of its spirit. This would appear to locate her more centrally in the modernist project — the 'primitive' being the locus of spiritual rejuvenation of both life and art. Carr's 'Big Raven' is not so much a portrait of a great brooding loneliness (as she had hoped) but a powerful assertion of natural (aboriginal) life force. Interestingly however, Carr's art successfully generates that spirit where many of the modernists' attempts to harness and deploy it was unsuccessful. Much modernist art feels bereft of 'spirit' or of the emotion of joy — so much of it is about loss and violence that threatens to overwhelm (think of Lawrence, Woolf, Eliot). From this point of view then, Wright is closer to the modernists.

Wherever Wright and Carr are situated on that trajectory between the romantic and the modern, it is their relationship to 'other' that differentiates them. Curiously, although politically engaged, Wright is more removed than Carr from the aboriginality they both desire. It is significant that Carr was named 'Klee Wyck' or 'laughing one', on her first engagement with aboriginal community. She was identified by the Indians as 'one of us' — and named for her joyous spirit. Hers is an emotional and spiritual engagement with a people and their culture. It is equally significant that Wright (unlike Preston, whose position is different again) does not engage with aboriginal art or form an easy relationship. Rational and philosophic by nature she is unable to enter freely into aboriginal relationship as perhaps the more naïve Carr is able to do, and is ultimately othered by the dominant emotion of that colonial relationship — guilt. It is surely significant that central to Wright's tortured and complex relationship to the Aboriginal people is the recognition of the 'arrogance' of guilt and that it should nevertheless soak her poetry as the spirit of Cumshewa soaks Carr's paper and paint. Put most simply, Wright's poetry focuses upon the wrongs 'we' have done, where Carr's painting focuses upon what 'they' got right. The ethics of 'we and they' is entangled in a complex net of politics and poetics.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In 'Two Dreamtimes' Judith Wright refers to herself as 'born of the conquerors'.
- <sup>2</sup> In her lifetime Emily Carr was better known, and indeed feted, by the Canadian public as a writer than a painter. Her volume of 'autobiographical' short stories was published under the title *Klee Wyck* in 1941, and won her the prestigious Canadian Governor General's award.
- <sup>3</sup> Officially formed in 1920, The Group of Seven was comprised of east-coast Canadian artists J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Franklin Carmichael, F.H. Varley and Frank Johnston. The painters were inspired by the Canadian landscape of the North, and were committed to the artistic representation of Canadian subject matter in a form and style that was particular to Canadian experience and experimentation.
- <sup>4</sup> Reference is made here to a line from Judith Wright's poem, 'Two Dreamtimes'.

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, Christopher 1997, *Art in Australia: From Colonization to Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Art Gallery of Greater Victoria 1999, *To The Totem Forests: Emily Carr and Contemporaries Interpret Coastal Villages*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC.
- Brady, Veronica 1998, *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, Angus & Robertson-Harper/Collins, Sydney.
- Breuer, Michael and Kerry Mason Dodd 1984, *Sunlight in the Shadows: The Landscape of Emily Carr*, Oxford UP, Toronto.
- Butel, Elizabeth 1985, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement*, Penguin and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Ringwood, Victoria.
- Carr, Emily 1962, 'Cumshewa', *Klee Wyck*, abridged, ed. Ira Dilworth, Clarke Irwin, Toronto, pp. 23–25.
- 1962a [1951], *Klee Wyck*, abridged, ed. Ira Dilworth, Clarke Irwin, Toronto.
- 1962b, 'Ucluelet', *Klee Wyck*, pp.3–12.
- 1966 [1942], *The Book of Small*, Clarke Irwin, Toronto.
- 1966, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of an Artist*, Clarke Irwin, Toronto.
- 1967 [1944], *The House of All Sorts*, Clarke Irwin, Toronto.
- 1971 [1946], *Growing Pains: An Autobiography*, Clarke Irwin, Toronto.
- Crean, Susan ed. 2003, *Opposite Contraries: The Unknown Journals of Emily Carr and Other Writings*, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.
- Crosby, Marcia 1991, 'Construction of the Imaginary Indian', *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- Davidson, Jim 1982, Interview with Judith Wright, *Meanjin*, 41.2 (June), pp. 321–38.
- Douglas, Stan 1991, *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, Talonbooks, Vancouver.
- Dutton, Geoffrey 1974, *White on Black: The Australian Aborigine Portrayed in Art*, Macmillan (& Art Gallery Board of Australia), South Melbourne.
- Laurence, Robin 1996, *Beloved Land: The World of Emily Carr*, Vancouver Art Gallery and Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.
- Nasgaard, Roald 1984, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America 1890–1940*, Toronto UP and Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
- North, Ian ed., 1980, *The Art of Margaret Preston*, Art Gallery Board of South Australia, Adelaide.
- Shadbolt, Doris 1979, *The Art of Emily Carr*, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.
- 1990, *Emily Carr*, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.
- Tippett, Maria 1982 [1979], *Emily Carr: A Biography*, Penguin, Markham, Ontario.
- Udall, Sharyn Rohlfen 2000, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own*, Yale UP, New Haven.

- Wright, Judith 1959, *The Generations of Men*, Oxford UP, Melbourne.
- 1972, 'The Individual in a New Environmental Age', *Because I Was Invited*, pp. 248–56.
- 1975a, *Because I was Invited*, Oxford UP, Melbourne.
- 1975b, Foreword to *Because I Was Invited*, pp. vii–xii.
- 1981, *The Cry For the Dead*, Oxford UP, Melbourne.
- 1985, *We Call For a Treaty*, Collins/Fontana, Sydney.
- 1991, *Born of the Conquerors*, Australian Studies Press, Canberra.
- 1994a, 'At Cooloolah', [*The Two Fires*] *Collected Poems*, pp. 140–41.
- 1994b, 'Bora Ring', [*The Moving Image*] *Collected Poems*, p. 8.
- 1994c, *Collected Poems: 1942–1985*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.
- 1994d, 'Nigger's Leap, New England', [*The Moving Image*] *Collected Poems*, pp. 13–15.
- 1994e, 'The Trains', [*The Moving Image*] *Collected Poems*, p. 12.
- 1994f, 'Two Dreamtimes', [*Alive*] *Collected Poems*, p. 315–18.
- 1999, *Half a Lifetime*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.